



July 10, 2003

**Backgrounder:**

## **The Conflict in Liberia and U.S. Policy Options**

### **Introduction**

In response to calls from the international community for U.S. intervention, President Bush is considering whether to commit U.S. troops to help quell chaos and restore order in the civil war-torn African nation of Liberia. On July 7, a 32-person U.S. team arrived in the Liberian capital of Monrovia to assess the situation, gather facts, and prepare options for possible U.S. military involvement. At a press conference in South Africa on July 9, President Bush stated that if U.S. troops are sent to Liberia, “We won’t overextend our troops.”<sup>1</sup>

While an exact mission for U.S. troops is yet undefined, the deployment of possibly 500-1,000 U.S. troops could involve the providing of financial and logistical support to United Nations and African peacekeeping troops, as well as having American troops restore and maintain order, allowing the safe return of international non-governmental organizations, which recently fled due to the violent and unstable conditions within Liberia.

The possibility of at least a limited U.S. involvement increased with Liberian President Charles Taylor’s decision on July 6 to accept an offer of asylum from Nigeria. President Bush made it clear that Taylor had to relinquish power and leave the country as a first step toward peace, saying, “In order for there to be peace and stability in Liberia, Charles Taylor needs to leave now.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Washington Times*, “Bush Won’t ‘Overextend’ U.S. Troops,” July 10, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Remarks by President Bush in the Roosevelt Room, July 2, 2003.

## **U.S. Has Strong Historic Ties to Liberia, But It's Not a U.S. Colony**

One of the justifications offered for a possible U.S. intervention in Liberia is its strong historic ties to America. As National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice recently stated, “We have a historic relationship with Liberia that is unlike our relationship anywhere else on the continent.”<sup>3</sup>

Liberia was founded in 1822 by the American Colonization Society as a refuge for freed slaves. Its capital, Monrovia, was named after the fifth U.S. President, James Monroe. However, while Liberia was colonized by freed U.S. slaves, it never was an American colony. Nonetheless, throughout the past two centuries, the United States has maintained strong commercial and diplomatic relations with Liberia. U.S. companies have been heavily involved in Liberia’s rubber, timber, and iron ore production. Until recently, Liberia has also been a major recipient of U.S. foreign assistance monies. Liberia has served as a strategic location for U.S. military exercises in Africa and for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. Moreover, Liberians have stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the United States and its allies in both major world wars and during the Cold War. To this day, Liberians remain overwhelmingly pro-American.

As a result of these long-standing connections, President Bush has rightly stated that “it’s created a certain sense of expectations” for American action.<sup>4</sup> However, these “expectations” have to be combined with the twin facts that America’s last peacekeeping expedition in Africa to Somalia ended horribly, and that American forces are currently engaged in numerous combat operations around the world in an effort to defend vital U.S. national security interests.

## **Liberia Facts**

### **The 1989-1996 Civil War**

In 1989, Charles Taylor, the leader of the rebel group known as the National Patriotic Front, led a revolt against the Liberian dictator Samuel Doe that triggered seven years of civil war during which an estimated 200,000 people died.<sup>5</sup> Taylor’s faction emerged from the fighting as the dominant force. In 1996, a cease fire was mediated by the United Nations, United States, African Union, and the Economic Union of Western African States (ECOWAS).

### **Charles Taylor Elected President**

In 1997, the Liberian people elected Charles Taylor, then principal warlord, as President of Liberia, hoping to end the carnage that had beset the country. It was hoped that following the elections, Liberia would begin a period of genuine reconciliation, creating an environment for reconstruction, and

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<sup>3</sup> Press Briefing by Dr. Condoleezza Rice on the President's Trip to Africa, July 3, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> President Bush, roundtable interview with African print journalists, July 3, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> CNN, “Liberia’s Taylor Seeking Asylum,” July 5, 2003.

witnessing a process of democratization. Regrettably, Mr. Taylor showed no capacity to make the transition from warlord to statesman, and demonstrated little tolerance for democratic principles.

Fighting resumed in 2000 when a dissident rebel group, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), revolted against Taylor. The violence has persisted ever since. LURD and its allies now hold 60 percent of the country with the country's economy and infrastructure in ruins. Thousands have died and illness runs rampant. Much of the 3.3 million population is homeless and starving.<sup>6</sup>

### **Taylor's Illicit Behavior**

Liberians today live under a brand of domestic terrorism that already has been exported to Sierra Leone, a terrorism which President Taylor could inflict elsewhere in the region. Civil wars in Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and instability in Guinea are all offshoots of the Liberian conflict.<sup>7</sup> Liberia currently is under U.N. sanctions because of Taylor's patronage for the rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in neighboring Sierra Leone. Taylor's surrogates maimed, raped, and killed civilians in his quest to control the diamond fields of Sierra Leone.

As National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice stated recently, "Charles Taylor is, by the way, not just a problem for Liberia, he's a problem for the region. One of the reasons that the President is concerned about the situation in Liberia is that Charles Taylor has been a source of insurrection and insurgency in surrounding countries. And the efforts to make stable places like Sierra Leone, in which the British are involved, are extremely important to the stability of West Africa."<sup>8</sup>

On June 4, 2003, Taylor was indicted by a U.N.-backed war crimes court for Sierra Leone on charges that in exchange for diamonds, he armed and trained rebels there who killed thousands of civilians and abducted and tortured others. Taylor was in Ghana, engaged in peace talks with the various involved parties, but upon learning of his indictment, returned to Liberia. However, rebel groups attacked Monrovia within hours of his return. The ensuing violence lasted for five days.

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<sup>6</sup> CNN, "Liberia's Taylor Seeking Asylum," July 5, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> *London Daily Telegraph*, "U.S. Ready to Intervene in Liberian Conflict," June 30, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Condoleezza Rice, press briefing on the President's Trip to Africa, July 3, 2003.

### *Taylor Agrees to Leave, then Reneges*

A cease-fire agreement between the parties was reached in Ghana on June 17. As part of the agreement, Taylor was required to leave government and Liberia by July 17. However, within ten days after agreeing to the cease-fire, Taylor reneged on his pledge to leave Liberia. As a result, rebel groups unleashed another wave of mass violence in Liberia, killing up to 700 people within a matter of days.

### *United Nations and Others Urge U.S. Intervention*

Following the breakdown of the June 17 cease-fire and the resumption of violence within Liberia, the United Nations, Britain, France, and many African nations appealed for calm in Liberia, and called on the United States to intervene in the conflict and restore order. Specifically, U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan appealed to the Bush Administration to consider sending forces and leading a U.N. peacekeeping mission to Liberia. On July 1, Annan told reporters that “several countries, members of the UN have appealed for [a U.S.-led peacekeeping force]. The Liberian population is also asking for that.”<sup>9</sup>

Annan also said, “We need a country with capacity, a military capacity, that can deploy a robust force – it doesn't have to be very large – that can make a difference on the ground and can team up with West African forces that are ready to help monitor the cease-fire, to create space and time for the peace negotiations to be completed and lead Liberia out of its misery. And so we need a country with real capacity to go in with a robust force.”<sup>10</sup>

The British and French governments have also called on the United States to send troops. Currently, both the British and the French have peacekeepers deployed in Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire. The British sent 4,500 peacekeepers to Sierra Leone in 2000, its former colony, to help restore stability and prevent the collapse of a U.N. peacekeeping mission (UNAMSIL) that was brutally attacked by Taylor's forces.<sup>11</sup> In 2002, France sent 4,000 troops to its former colony of Cote d'Ivoire to prevent the collapse of the government there. Because of the success of these interventions in quelling violence and providing some modicum of stability to a perpetually fragile region, both the British and French governments have stated that the same can occur if the United States sends troops to Liberia.

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<sup>9</sup> U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, in remarks to the press in Bern, Switzerland, July 1, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Annan, July 1, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> *Washington Post*, “Intervention in Liberia Would Signal Shift,” July 5, 2003.

### *African Requests for U.S. Involvement*

African leaders – including Liberia’s Taylor – have asked the United States to intervene. In talks in Ghana, U.N. Security Council ambassadors and other regional leaders have met to discuss assembling and deploying a 5,000-member force to restore order in Liberia. Mohamed ibn Chambas, a top official of the Economic Community of West African States, stated, “We can provide the manpower, but we need material support and participation of some members of the Security Council, especially the United States of America.”<sup>12</sup>

### *U.S. Response*

On June 26, President Bush made his first call for Taylor to relinquish power. To facilitate such a development, on July 4, Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke with Nigerian President Obasanjo and U.N. Secretary-General Annan about efforts to get Taylor to step down as soon as possible.<sup>13</sup> On July 6, after meeting with Obasanjo, Taylor accepted the offer of asylum from the Nigerian president, thus fulfilling President Bush’s key demand. Taylor, however, did not indicate – and remains noncommittal – as to when he would leave Liberia. Taylor has stated previously that he would not leave until an international force was in place to guarantee peace in the country.<sup>14</sup>

Getting Taylor to accept the U.S. condition was only the first step of the White House’s three-step process. On June 30, U.S. Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations James Cunningham stated that the United States wanted three conditions met for further discussion about the nature of a peacekeeping force in Liberia. Cunningham said that Washington would insist on Taylor giving up power, on a political agreement among the parties, and international support for a peace process.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Reuters*, “Africans Seek U.S. Involvement in Monrovia,” June 29, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> *CNN*, “Liberia’s Taylor Seeking Asylum,” July 5, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> *New York Times*, “Liberian President Defies Call by Bush to Give Up Post,” June 27, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> *CNN*, “U.S. ‘Considering’ Liberia Role,” July 1, 2003.

## The President's Options

Peace in Liberia is crucial for much of West Africa. Moreover, the recently concluded peace arrangement in Sierra Leone cannot be consolidated as long as Liberia remains a failed state. All of the resources, time, and effort spent in Sierra Leone by the international community will be wasted unless and until the Liberia situation is resolved by ending both the Taylor/LURD war and the persecution of Liberians by Taylor and his government.

If the President decides to commit U.S. forces to a mission in Liberia, he will do so at a time when highly-trained U.S. forces are engaged in strategically necessary operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere vital to winning the War on Terrorism. The decision to intervene in civil-war-torn Liberia, while meritorious, would be, in essence, a discretionary action, not a strategic calculation, and would necessarily entail commitment of scarce resources (including troops, lift capacity, and monies) from areas that pose direct threats to U.S. national security.

As President Bush gathers information, considers his options, and consults with Congress, it would appear that he has four realistic policy options:

- Take no additional action.
- Provide financial support for other countries to deploy peacekeepers.
- Deploy U.S. troops as peacekeepers to Liberia.
- Employ some combination of the last two options.

### **Option one (take no additional action)**

This option essentially requires the United States to do nothing more than it is already doing – which, nevertheless, is not inconsiderable. According to the Congressional Research Service, the U.S. security assistance program in Africa “has expanded in recent years, primarily in response to widening conflict and political instability in Africa.”<sup>16</sup> The Administration is seeking \$24 million in FY2004 under the Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) for Africa programs, compared with \$40 million requested in FY2003. Support for the Africa Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI), which trained small units of African armies for possible peacekeeping duties, as well as for other regional peacekeeping initiatives, came from the PKO program. Moreover, Foreign Military Financing would rise from \$18.5 million to \$23 million under the FY2004 request.

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<sup>16</sup> *Congressional Research Service*, “Africa: U.S. Foreign Assistance Issues,” May 20, 2003.

In addition, the United States contributes to United Nations peacekeeping operations in Africa and elsewhere through a program entitled Contributions to International Peacekeeping Activities (CIPA). CIPA for Africa increased significantly in FY2002 due to U.S. support for U.N. peacekeeping in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.<sup>17</sup> The U.N. Mission to Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), which includes troops from Nigeria, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Russia and Nepal, was sent to maintain peace as the country returned to democracy after a 10-year civil war. It is currently the United Nations' biggest peace-keeping force anywhere in the world, but its size is due to be reduced gradually to 4,000 men by the end of 2004, when its current mandate expires.

### **Option two (provide additional financial support)**

This option requires the United States to expend additional monies to African peacekeeping funds, but would not include deployment of U.S. troops. In fact, one of the most logical scenarios – and most readily transferable – would be to have UNAMSIL, whose mandate is expiring and whose troops are being phased down, take on a role in Liberia or even to send the troops that are being phased out to join a new Liberian mission.

The idea of the United States providing cash instead of troops in peacekeeping operations in Liberia is not new. In fact, the United States, under the Clinton Administration, has done this before. From September 1993-1997, the U.N. Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL), working in cooperation with the West African cease-fire monitoring group (ECOMOG), helped to provide a suitable environment for the country's presidential election. The United States contributed \$5.9 million for that mission but provided no troops.<sup>18</sup> Such a scenario could be reenacted for a second Liberia peacekeeping operation.

### **Option three (deploy U.S. troops as peacekeepers)**

This option is the most comprehensive. It requires that highly trained, combat forces be reassigned and deployed to Liberia to lead a peacekeeping operation (because U.S. forces should not be under the command of a non-U.S. officer), enforce a peace (that does not yet exist), quell chaos and establish order, provide for the safe return of non-governmental organizations, facilitate the return of internally displaced persons, and, finally, hand off the reins to another country to oversee all the work that the U.S. troops had accomplished. While such a mission will divert scarce resources, it would provide the best chance for success.

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<sup>17</sup> *Congressional Research Service*, May 20, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itps/0498/ijpe/pj28fact.htm>

## **Conclusion**

Recently, some Senators have stated that Congress should vote to approve such a deployment if the President decides one is necessary. However, according to the 1973 War Powers Resolution, the president, as commander-in-chief of the U.S. armed forces, has the authority to deploy U.S. troops for limited periods without prior congressional approval (although the president is required to report to Congress before troops are deployed and within 48 hours of any deployment). This does not mean that Congress is left without a say or a role, or that President Bush would be prudent to ignore Congress. Congress can, of course, support any presidential decision by the use of a resolution. It can also convene hearings and question Administration officials on the use of military force in Liberia.

While the President will make the initial decision on what U.S. policy in Liberia will be, Congress will want to work closely with the President in defining and supporting it.

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